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SUBJECT: EZRA OUTLINES ISRAEL'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION

Ref: (A) Tel Aviv 195 (B)07 Tel Aviv 3583

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. In a speech on February 26, Israel's Minister of Environmental Protection (MEP) outlined the most pressing environmental concerns facing Israel today. He touched on both the well-known issues, such as the Ramat Hovav toxic waste dump site, as well as on longer-term problems such as the pollution of aquifers from illegal construction dumping. The Minister claimed greater enforcement of environmental laws is the solution; the skeptical audience was waiting to see what, if any, action would be taken. End Summary.

Pollution Pervades -----

¶2. (SBU) Minister of Environmental Protection Gideon Ezra, speaking at an Australian-Israeli Chamber of Commerce meeting in February, offered a frank assessment of Israel's major environmental challenges. He started with Ramat Hovav, Israel's major toxic waste site (ref A). Although it is distant from populated areas, he acknowledged that concerns remain regarding the air, land, and water pollution it generates.

¶3. (SBU) Addressing air pollution, Ezra shared research showing a sharp drop in pollution during the Yom Kippur holiday, when by tradition, all of Israel stops driving for a 24-hour period. This underscored the link between vehicular pollution and Israel's environment. He reinforced the need to continue research into alternative fuels, and said that licensing of cars in Israel will become stricter due to laws that have been passed recently in order to prevent pollution.

¶4. (SBU) Haifa Bay refineries and the pollution in the bay also received the Minister's attention. He noted recent efforts by the Ministry to decrease production and use of carcinogenic substances in the bay area, home to one of Israel's industrial centers. The Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institute (IOLR) that monitors coastal waters on behalf of the MEP, however, found no significant change in the quality of coastal waters between 2005 and 2006, although it noted some minor reduction in toxic metal pollution during that period. However, the IOLR noted that the concentration of fertilizers and of urban and industrial wastes in most of Israel's coastal streams and rivers is significantly greater than that found in estuaries in other parts of the world. (Note: The IOLR stated recently in a separate report that these higher concentrations are the result of high sewage flow and a low level of natural water flow, and that such pollution could cause cancer and nervous system damage, and hinder child development. End Note)

15. (SBU) The Kishon River, which flows into Haifa Bay, continues to be the most polluted in the country, Minister Ezra acknowledged. While its level of pollution has decreased somewhat, the bottom of the river still contains large quantities of toxic metals. Other rivers such as the Yarkon, Naaman, and Sorek rivers that drain into the Mediterranean also have high levels of pollution from fertilizers and metals. (Post reported an alternative list of most-polluted rivers ref B.)

Recycling and Reclamation

16. (SBU) The minister raised the topic of recycling, stating that not enough was being done to separate cans, bottles, plastic, and paper. A recent MEP campaign to encourage recycling of batteries deserved favorable mention. Recycling of tires too was a concern for the Minister, and he observed that they must be cut up before being buried, otherwise they continually resurface. (Note: ESTOff inquired at the MEP why more glass recycling was not being done, and the response was that the distance such heavy recyclables had to be transported to Israel's sole glass recycling plant in the South of the country made it economically not feasible.)

17. (SBU) Ezra reiterated that the improper disposal of construction, demolition, and excavation debris (so-called C, D, and E waste) is one of Israel's most severe environmental problems. The country has experienced a construction boom over the past five years, but only a small fraction of the waste this has generated is disposed of in regulated waste sites. At these regulated sites, local authorities are responsible for the treatment of C, D, and E waste in the same way that they are responsible for treating municipal solid waste. The majority of C, D and E waste ends up dumped illegally in open areas, along roads, and in the West Bank. The environmental and health impacts of illegal disposal and improper treatment of this waste are especially severe, Ezra acknowledged. These include damage to surface and groundwater sources, soil pollution, reduction in land value, aesthetic nuisances, fires and air pollution, damage to open spaces, proliferation of pests and damage to the quality of life of residents and to the future development potential of local authorities. The officer responsible for C, D, and E waste at the MEP, Uri Tal, separately has said most of the degradation (some 31 sites) occurs in areas overlying the coastal and mountain aquifers, where irreversible damage of the aquifers is possible. For example, this is a problem for municipal authorities in 17 different localities in the Kinneret Drainage Basin, threatening damage to the Sea of Galilee, Israel's only freshwater lake.

18. (SBU) Minister Ezra reinforced his Ministry's position favoring more use of renewable energy in order to preserve the environment for future generations. The solar energy generating plants planned for the Negev will be free of greenhouse gas emissions, for example. Alternative energy sources still have an environmental impact, he observed, noting that in order to generate 100 megawatts the solar plants need 4000 dunam (16,000 acres) of space, and that in order to capitalize on wind energy, a significant part of Israel's limited coastline would need to be used. His implied message: alternative energies have their own costs.

Next Steps

19. (SBU) During the Q&A session, there was clear agreement in the audience that there needs to be stronger environmental law enforcement. One person in the audience even suggested the use of the civil police and army if necessary, but the Minister ruled that out. Another attendee inquired about alternatives to landfill for disposal of asbestos waste. Some audience members tried to focus Ezra's attention on their concerns regarding an ongoing asbestos removal project in Nahariya.

110. (SBU) Comment: The frank discussion by the Minister reflected more openness and readiness to engage on the thorny issues than had previously been the case. Future enforcement activity, however, will be the true test of the ministry's commitment to redress years of ignoring the pollution problem in the name of economic growth and national security.

